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ENGLISH 350: American Literature (1820-1865)

An Analysis of Emily Dickinson's 712

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Emily Dickinson was certainly one of the most unique and intriguing of all American women poets. Her lifestyle, reclusive and obscure, is very evident in her writings. She has focused on topics such as death, religion, the government, and certainly the yearnings of a lonely woman. For this literary analysis I have chosen to evaluate 712 ("Because I could not stop for Death--). This poem, perhaps her most popular, describes the coming of Death and the journey the speaker takes into the afterlife. Many comparisons can be made between aspects of everyday life and what the speaker experiences once life has passed. In this analysis I will explore the structure and how it makes the poem seem like unspoken thoughts, describe what metaphors are made between life and death, and examine what impact Dickinson's lifestyle might have had on the poem.

The first major step in evaluating this poem is to explore how the structure and characteristics of the poem work to resemble unspoken thought. One of the most striking features of any Dickinson poem (including 712) is her replacement of punctuation with mere dashes. While this was revolutionary and not necessarily appealing at the time, it works in 712 and other poems to help the poem resemble unspoken thoughts. The same is true of her irregular capitalization. Individuals tend to hold certain thoughts as more vital than others. In most cases, Dickinson seems to capitalize single words that seem more important in the speaker's mind, possibly even her own mind ("Death," "Immortality," "Children"). This helps the reader better understand how the speaker is thinking. The poem is set up in stanzas of four lines each, like many of her other poems, and is four stanzas in entirety. The topic of each stanza is different. This resembles the way in which thoughts shift and stray. For example, the first stanza focuses on the arrival of Death. The second then transitions into the beginning of the voyage, while the third describes what the speaker sees throughout the journey. This shift of thought continues until the poem ends with the openness of Eternity. In effect, the entire structure is symbolic of what seems only a short moment of contemplation about death and the afterlife. This is

often a trait of Dickinson's poetry. Many of her poems are meant to symbolize only a brief moment of thought.

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The poem as a whole is a convincing metaphor between things from everyday life and the speaker's vision of death and the afterlife. The speaker in the poem uses concrete things from life to help the reader understand what he or she views as the afterlife. The entire impression of the afterlife is compared to a carriage ride with a "civil" man (essentially a date) and the reader is left with Eternity at the end. This sense of endlessness can be applied to both the emotion of love in life and the duration of the carriage ride in the afterlife. The poem begins with one of Dickinson's most memorable lines, "Because I could not stop for Death." Death is representative of a gentleman caller who is kindly picking up the speaker (obviously a woman) for their date. *how to? explain* Once again, the capitalization of "Death" seems to give it a proper, almost human quality. The carriage seems to represent a union between the speaker and her beau that persists into the afterlife, and the sense of immortality can apply to both the bond that the two share and the nature of the wraith Death himself.

The two begin their carriage ride in the second stanza. This ride is a concrete event in life, but can symbolize the development of the relationship between the two. In the afterlife, the carriage ride is the endless voyage through oblivion. Death is personified as having "Civility." When taken in accordance with the afterlife, this could imply the fact that no one can be immortal; death comes to all. In the third stanza, the ride continues through both love and death, passing a school where children "strive" and fields of grain "gaze," two unusual and abstract images that leave the reader with an ominous feeling. Either picture would be beautiful in life but has been construed as laborious in the afterlife. A more outright reference to love is the "Ring," though it is used to mean a playground, which would symbolize engagement and a commitment to marriage. The two pass the sun as it sets and the reader begins to feel some kind of closure, but then the speaker corrects her self, saying that the sun has passed them instead. This begins the fourth stanza. The

picture of the sun passing them leaves an impression of sunset cast upon their two tombstones, a concrete example of their afterlife dilemma. The morning dew is said to become "quivering and chill." This has obvious meaning in the picture of the afterlife. In life it might represent the coming of winter during the first year of marriage (marriage typically occurs in the summer months). The idea of marriage is once again implied by the speaker's gossamer gown, cape, and "Tulle," which would be her veil.

In the fifth stanza, the journey comes to an end at an underground dwelling. This is the place of burial which the speaker will inevitably fill. The "Roof" would represent the head stone and the "Cornice" would most likely be a coffin, a decorative aspect of burial which helps to hide the face of death. In life, a "House that seemed / A swelling of the Ground" would be symbolic of pregnancy. The speaker has already created the impression of marriage, and birth would most likely follow. The cornice might refer to the child within the womb as it is described as being underground. The fact that the "Roof was scarcely visible" would imply early pregnancy, when the swelling of the belly is not so noticeable. The sixth and final stanza ends the poem with openness in either meaning. The speaker is describing the voyage and duration of the afterlife as eternal. In the afterlife, she feels no sense of time. The idea that her love for her man is endless comes from this stanza as well. There is a greater portrayal of love in this case, however; the introduction of the child brings to her the love of family. The stanza is a realization to the speaker, in either case, that although she cannot begin to fathom eternity, she definitely knows when it is present within and around her.

With this reading, it is obvious that Dickinson's life had a tremendous influence on the inner meaning of the poem. Dickinson died single and never bore children. However, it is known that she had relationships outside of marriage, most presumably with married men. This would give 712 a whole new meaning. It was written in 1863, when Dickinson would have been thirty-three. She might have experienced a few of these relationships, but it is more likely that she had experienced just a single, passionate one. In either case,

But isn't
this a
"hideous"
pregnancy?
filled w/ death?

proof?

the poem could express both her jealousy of married women and her yearning for marriage of her own. When a couple marries, they make their love to one another open and public. Any loves that Dickinson had, however, would have been in secrecy. Such concealment of emotion can be difficult to endure. Dickinson was able to love and obviously fell in love during her lifetime, but she was never able to find a man to "show off," so to speak, perhaps because the men she loved were often married. With marriage comes the conception of children, as is the case within the poem. Dickinson might have longed for this more than anything. The fact that she might have had jealousy toward the woman that was married to the man she loved is obvious. Equally apparent is envy of a woman's pregnancy. Dickinson's seclusion might relate to this entire idea. Perhaps she felt as though she was a failure for being unmarried and chose to hide from the outside community in Amherst. This is complete speculation, ^{yes it is —} however, and one can only guess what reasons she might have had for her reclusive and obscure lifestyle.

This lifestyle, however, is certainly one of the factors that makes her poetry most interesting. She wrote with her own ideas toward structure and voice, refusing to conform with any previous rules for the composition of poetry. Had more of her poems been published during her lifetime when they were written, they might have had a drastic effect on the literary scene of that time. Dickinson herself might have taken on a different lifestyle in accordance with popularity as a writer, as well. Her poetry remains today, however, as one of the most intriguing set of works to ever come from an American writer. There can be no doubt that the life she lived had a direct impact on this.

You have some excellent insights into her poetry. I would suggest sticking to that + leaving her personal life out of it unless you cite/use sources that prove this —

This is speculation — where is your proof? need to cite it —

REFERENCES

Magill. Critical Survey of Poetry: English Language Series, Vol. II. Salem Press: England Cliffs, New Jersey, 1982.